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Reading Modernity: Jules Verne and the Formation of a Modern Hungarian Reading Public (1865–1877)

ABSTRACT

The Jenő Farkas's study explores the rapid transformation of reading practices in Hungary in the second half of the nineteenth century through the case of Jules Verne's early Hungarian reception. Focusing on a single, formative decade (1865–1877), the paper examines how Verne's novels—first serialized in newspapers and later published in book form—became a catalyst for broader changes in literary consumption, translation practices, and cultural mediation. The analysis highlights the role of the press, especially *Vasárnapi Újság*, in shaping new reading habits by means of abridged, explanatory translations designed to educate and expand a growing readership. Particular attention is paid to the figure of Károly Szász, whose adaptive translation strategies reflect both economic constraints of serialized publication and a conscious pedagogical mission. The study also situates Hungarian reception within the bilingual (Hungarian–German) cultural context of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, revealing a complex pattern of double reception and competition between linguistic publics. By tracing the editorial framing, paratexts, translation methods, and publication strategies of Verne's works, the article argues that the Hungarian reception of Jules Verne offers a revealing microhistory of modernization in reading culture. The decade under examination demonstrates how translation, journalism, and literary adaptation contributed to the rapid expansion and transformation of readership in Hungary. This context also clarifies the extraordinary role that serialized fiction played in introducing both Hungarian and world literature to an expanding readership. It is therefore not coincidental that two decades later Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was first published anywhere in the world in Hungarian translation, appearing in serialized form in a daily newspaper over the course of three months. (see Jenő Farkas: La prima versione ungherese di *Dracula,* in Visum et repertum 7 and Jenő Farkas - vampvaults Webseite!)

A number of Jules Verne's novels—such as *Mathias Sandorf*, *The Carpathian Castle*, *The Danube Pilot*, *The Secret of Wilhelm Storitz*, as well as the short story *Mr. Re-Dièze and Miss Mi-Bémol* published in the volume *Yesterday and Tomorrow*—contain extensive historical, geographical, and ethnographic references to Hungary, Transylvania, and their inhabitants.

With undisguised pride, Hungarians often point out that there are larger nations to which Jules Verne devoted far less attention than he did to Hungary. What explains this claim?

In the mid-nineteenth century, the struggle of the Hungarian people was undoubtedly at the center of interest among the Parisian intelligentsia, especially since the longest of the 1848–49 revolutions had been brutally crushed by two empires: the Habsburg Empire and that of the Tsar. The warm reception given in Paris (as reflected in the press of 1849–50) to Lajos Kossuth—one of the leaders of the Hungarian Revolution and a symbol of revolutionary movements—certainly contributed to the growing visibility of Hungary and the Hungarians across Europe. Finally, one must also consider the romantic exoticism that was fashionable in Europe at the time, from which neither Hungary nor Transylvania could escape.

The reception of Jules Verne in Hungary was so profound in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth that even today some Hungarian readers believe that Verne Gyula (the Hungarian version of the name Jules) was Hungarian, or at least spent part of his youth in Hungary.

The writer Péter Esterházy once remarked in an interview[1] that in Hungary people took great pleasure in confusing Jules Verne with Mór Jókai (1825–1904), who was translated and published in France under the name Maurice Jókai. One could easily cite titles by Verne that many Hungarians assume to be novels by Jókai—and vice versa.

A major specialist in the Hungarian reception of Jules Verne, Magda Kiszeli, published an important book in Debrecen in 1935 [2] on Verne's image of the Hungarian nation. Kiszeli had the opportunity to meet Madame Michel Verne, the writer's daughter-in-law, who made Verne's personal library available to her so that she could examine the reference works on Hungarian history and geography. She was also able to see Jules Verne's famous globe, damaged by the pin marks with which the author had traced his "extraordinary voyages."

There is therefore clear evidence that, for his novels, the author consulted the historical works of Auguste de Gérando: *Essai historique sur l'origine des Hongrois* (1844), *La Transylvanie et ses habitants* (1845), and *De l'esprit public en Hongrie depuis la Révolution Française* (1848). Another book mentioned by Jules Verne is Elisée Reclus's *Voyage aux régions minières de la Transylvanie occidentale* (1874), as well as Tissot's *La Hongrie de l'Adriatique au Danube* (1883). The author was also undoubtedly familiar with the work of the historian Edouard Sayous, professor at the University of Besançon: *Histoire des Hongrois et de leur littérature politique de 1790–1815* (published in 1872) and *Histoire générale des Hongrois* (1876), a work awarded a prize by the Académie Française. Beyond these sources, there are also direct literary influences. The novel *Mathias Sandorf* was preceded by two French novels well known at the time: *L'Évangéliste* by Alphonse Daudet and *Le Prince de Zilah. Roman parisien* by Jules Claretie, which enjoyed remarkable success. A small detail for Verne enthusiasts: where does the name *Sandorf* come from? According to Magda Kiszeli—who maintained a long correspondence with Allotte de la Fuÿe, a relative of the Verne family—the final "f" in *Sandorf* distinguishes the name from the other Sándor (Alexander), namely Sándor Petőfi, the Hungarian poet who was killed by Russian soldiers during the 1848–49 Revolution near Sighişoara, and also from the Sándor appearing in Claretie's novel *Le Prince de Zilah*. This modification was introduced by Jules Verne as a gesture of friendship toward Claretie.

The Hungarian reception of Jules Verne raises a wide range of questions related to the history of translation, the press and publishing, the sociology of reading, the history of advertising, reception studies, and above all the issue of a double reception (Hungarian and German) of world literature within Hungary. In the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, there were effectively two official languages: Hungarian and German. As a result, in Budapest there were both Hungarian- and German-language journals and publishing houses that regularly issued Jules Verne's novels either in serialized form or as books. At the National Széchényi Library in Budapest, one can find German-language editions of Verne's novels bearing the stamp of the Imperial and Royal Army (k.u.k.), which attests to the fact that Verne was a favored reading choice among officers and soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

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[1] Jean-Paul Dekiss, "Entretien avec Péter Esterházy," *Revue Jules Verne*, No. 18/2004, Nantes, Bibliothèque Municipale / Musée Jules Verne, p. 54.

[2] Kiszeli, Magda: *Verne Gyula magyar nemzetképe*, Debrecen, 1935. See also: Hankiss, János: *Jules Verne. Tudomány a szépirodalomban*, Budapest, Franklin Társulat, 1930; Berencz, János: *Verne művei mai nevelési törekvéseink tükrében*, 1962; Svihran, Ladislav: *Barátunk Verne Gyula*, 1986; Berencz, János: *Verne kislexikon*, 1994; *Atlas Verne Gyula hősei nyomában*, 1999.

The first of Verne's books to be translated into Hungarian (*Journey to the Center of the Earth*, 1864) was published in 1865 in Pest by Adolf Hartleben, translated by Leo Beöthy[3] Hartleben was also the publisher who would go on to issue Verne's works in German for virtually the entire German-speaking world. It was no coincidence that Leo Beöthy—an economic journalist at the influential Pest daily *A Hon* ("The Homeland," founded by Mór Jókai in 1863) and at the same time an employee of the Ministry of Economy and Trade—undertook the translation of this novel.

The author's name was Magyarized as *Verne Gyula*. But where did this practice of Magyarizing foreign authors' names come from? German translations of the period also appeared under adapted forms such as *Julius Verne* or *Julius Michelet*.

With the exception of the first novel translated into Hungarian, mentioned above, all the others were initially published in serialized form in the newspapers and weekly journals of Budapest. The example set by the French journal *Le Magasin d'Éducation et de Récréation*, which serialized Jules Verne's novels, was quickly followed by the major German- and Hungarian-language dailies of Pest.

The *Pester Lloyd* (1854–1944), the German-language daily of Pest, published Verne's novels almost simultaneously with the French *Magasin*. Another important paper, *Vasárnapi Újság* ("Sunday Journal," 1854–1921), a weekly first published by Heckenast and, from 1873 onward, by the Franklin Society, serialized a number of Verne's novels and later issued them in book form through its own publishing house. The two political dailies *A Hon* ("The Homeland," 1863–1882) and *Pesti Napló* ("Pest Journal," 1850–1939) also published works by Jules Verne. The *Vasárnapi Újság* was the most widely known journal of the period, due in part to the fact that from 1864 onward it published, in almost every issue, excerpts from novels by authors who were well known across Europe. The writer, poet, and translator Károly Szász[4] was Verne's most important translator and promoter in Hungary. Remarkably, 125 years later, his translations were republished without any modifications, beginning in 1994, by the publishing houses Alexandra and Unikornis in two separate series of *The Complete Works of Jules Verne*.

The first novel published in *Vasárnapi Újság* (No. 22/1869), translated by Károly Szász, was *De la Terre à la Lune* (*Utazás a Holdba*). It appeared in twelve chapters of two to three columns each, abridged by the translator and published without his signature. The opening chapter began with a short introduction—the first of its kind in the history of Jules Verne's Hungarian reception. As a literary historian, Szász successfully grasped the essence of Verne's work: the fusion of the fabulous and the natural sciences in a vivid and compelling narrative form. At the same time, the intention of *Vasárnapi Újság* and of Szász himself to reach and educate a broader readership is evident. Szász observed a clear difference between the reading habits of the German-speaking audience of the Hungarian capital (notably the readers of *Pester Lloyd*) and those of Hungarian readers. He positioned himself as a cultural mediator, praising the exceptional qualities of Verne's writing in order to attract a wider audience. Szász provided an abridged—and one might say

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[3] *Utazás a Föld központja felé* by Verne Gyula. After the French original. Translated by Beöthy Leo. Pest, 1865, published by Adolf Hartleben.

[4] Károly Szász (1829–1905)—writer, poet, translator, Member of Parliament, Calvinist bishop and leading Protestant pastor of Hungary—was, in nineteenth-century Hungary, the most renowned translator of his time. A contemporary of Jules Verne, he translated Molière and Shakespeare, Byron and Victor Hugo, Shelley and Béranger; he also translated Désiré Nisard's *History of French Literature* (Nisard being the former director of the École Normale Supérieure). Szász published works on aesthetics and literary history, became a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and later chaired one of its sections. His inaugural academic address dealt with the problems of translation.

explanatory—translation in Hungarian. From today's perspective, this may seem unusual, but at the time such adaptations were both a practical necessity and an economic obligation for newspapers seeking to remain profitable. Below is Szász's introductory text in full:

> "In recent years, several imaginative works—yet profound from a social point of view—have succeeded in arousing the interest of cultivated readers throughout the world. Beneath the mask of seemingly improbable fantasy, these books have conveyed genuine knowledge and presented numerous established principles of the natural sciences in a novelistic form suited to the needs of the general public.
> These works, signed by the distinguished French writer Jules Verne, form a cycle entitled 'Extraordinary Voyages,' including the novels *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Adventures of Three Russians and Three Englishmen*, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*. All these works are characterized by scientific precision in content; it is the imaginative element that dominates the form and the framework in which the plot unfolds; and finally, it is the vivid and captivating presentation that carries readers along. Consequently, these novels are as enjoyable as they are instructive.
> In almost every language, thousands upon thousands of copies have appeared in multiple editions. Yet among all these novels, the most enduring and profound interest has been aroused by *From the Earth to the Moon*, which we wish to introduce to our readers at least in abridged form, since it has been little discussed in Hungarian literature. While the German-speaking readers of our country are already familiar with this novel—not only in book form but also from the columns of the daily *Pester Lloyd*, which published it in its entirety—we too shall follow the French edition and will also reproduce some of the illustrations from the original publication."

The following year, in 1870, the same journal published—again in Szász's translation—the novel *Autour de la Lune*, which had appeared in French only a few months earlier. At that time, Hungary had between 240 and 260 daily newspapers, magazines, and reviews, and competition for survival was intense. After the publication of the first Jules Verne novel, the circulation of the Hungarian *Sunday Journal* increased noticeably. One can observe a certain eagerness on the part of the editorial staff to introduce Verne's second novel to readers. In his introduction (No. 32/1870), the translator makes a clear and explicit connection between the previously published novel and the new one, thereby creating a sense of shared experience among readers around the world. This could be seen as a new stage in the development of reading habits among Hungarian readers. The abridged version was more detailed this time, and thus the education of the readership was consciously guided by the translator, who was one of the most prominent intellectual figures of the period.
Below is Szász's text:

> "There will surely be many readers, we hope, who still remember the series of articles we published in last year's issues based on Jules Verne's novel *From the Earth to the Moon*. The readers of that imaginative and instructive work became increasingly absorbed in the fate of the heroes traveling from the Earth to the Moon, yet they were not entirely satisfied with the ending of the book. They finished reading—whether the original volume or the abridged version published by us—with a certain grumbling, asking themselves: 'Well then! What happened next to those brave travelers?'
> Jules Verne himself did not wish to leave his readers without an answer, for he recognized the legitimacy of their expectation. He responded in a second book, which we now intend to present to our readers in abridged but more detailed form, in the hope that it will be received as warmly as *From the Earth to the Moon*.

> It will be useful to link the two books and to briefly recall the earlier narrative, so that readers will not be forced to search through past issues of our journal in order to better understand this new volume."

Two years later, in 1872, the Franklin Society of Budapest published the two abridged and revised novels together in a single volume entitled *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Around the Moon*. The name of the translator was not indicated, but the book included a postface entitled *Epilogue of the Reviser*, which almost certainly can be attributed to Károly Szász:

> "Kind reader, do not ask whether you have read a true story or a fairy tale! When you read a novel about Ardan and Nicholl—about heroes, about admirable or villainous characters, about unexpected turns and surprising developments—you do not ask whether all this actually happened or not. Rather, you ask a different question: could it have happened? If the book were unreal and implausible, filled with contradictions, you would cast it aside in deep annoyance—and you would be perfectly right to do so. But if you find that the inherent truth of possibility and probability is present in it, and if it succeeds in capturing your interest, that is more than enough. You should be convinced that everything you have read is built upon solid scientific truths and upon the power of the laws of nature and mathematics. Nowhere in the course of the lunar voyage will you find a single breach of scientific plausibility on the part of the author, nor will you see him draw false mathematical conclusions. Whether everything he described actually happened in reality, I do not know; but it is not impossible that it could be real. And if you wonder whether what you have read is the original version or a faithful translation of the novel, or rather an incomplete abridgment—well, dear reader, the answer is yours to choose."

In 1874, the *Sunday Journal* published the chapters of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* over the course of 38 issues (from No. 14 to No. 48). The serialization was preceded by a short clarification from the translator–narrator, Szász:

> "The excellent French writer Jules Verne—the author of the *Extraordinary Voyages*, several of whose novels we have already published in abridged form—has a learned man recount the following captivating story, in which he himself directly took part. Owing to the considerable length of this work, we are obliged to provide a brief summary; for this reason, we are compelled to assume the role of narrator."

Within the abridged narrative, the text contains explanatory notes on geographical locations, exotic animals, and even scenes of horror involving giant polyp-like creatures—everything necessary to sustain the reader's interest. At the end of the final chapter, a brief note appears: "After the French original," signed with the initials "–r." The translator, Károly Szász, still did not reveal his identity.

From 1875 onward, the Vasárnapi Újság began publishing the second and third parts of *The Mysterious Island*. The translator, still without revealing his identity, provided introductory remarks explaining the need to revisit the plot and characters of the earlier installments in order to refresh the readers' memory. He even suggested that it would be necessary to offer "an abridgment of the abridgment" to immerse readers once again in the atmosphere of the novel (see 1875, p. 342).

In the same issue, under the regular column "Literature and Arts," further details were given about the development of *The Mysterious Island*: the French author had not yet completed the novel, and the translator would publish the new episodes in the journal as soon as he received them. In the meantime, however, he proposed the translation of another Jules Verne

novel, *The Floating Island*, since the public had developed a strong appetite for Verne's works. In order to be the first in Hungary, *Vasárnapi Újság* had already begun publishing, in October 1874, the opening chapters of Verne's latest novel, *The Mysterious Island*, even though it had not yet been completed by the French author. This time, instead of a traditional introduction, the journal printed a footnote explaining that the novel was still unfinished:

> "When we present in condensed form—across several articles—the first part of the new installment of the *Extraordinary Voyages*, *The Mysterious Island*, which is currently being published, it is appropriate to inform our readers, based on the report of its publisher, J. Hetzel, about the subject and purpose of the novel.
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> With this book, the author of the voyages to the Moon and beneath the seas sought to enrich the series of Robinson novels. The castaways of a balloon are thrown onto a deserted island, which they must transform into a livable and habitable place. Whereas Robinson found on his wrecked ship a hundred tools and essential supplies, the balloon castaways arrive on the island completely deprived of everything. This is their disadvantage compared to Robinson.
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> Their great advantage, however, is that they are children of the nineteenth century, equipped with the scientific knowledge of their age. In possession of their learning and skills, they command resources of which Robinson could not even have dreamed.
>
> In this novel, Verne wished to demonstrate the absolute usefulness of science—not only for those living within society, but also for individuals left to themselves, for the lost. That is the lesson to be drawn from this work. Our readers will not share the fate of the balloon castaways, yet in this world everything is relative. Even within society we are often, repeatedly, left to our own devices; and in such moments, if we possess greater intellectual strength and resources, we are better able to withstand adversity."

There were notable differences between the publication of Jules Verne's novels in serialized newspaper form and their later appearance as books. The most characteristic example is *The Mysterious Island*, first published in the *Sunday Journal* in 1874 and later issued in book form in 1877. In the meantime, Szász had translated—both in abridged and complete versions—a considerable number of Verne's novels. With the 1877 book publication of *The Mysterious Island*, the translator felt the need to offer precise clarification regarding his method of translation. The following is the full text of the preface to the 1877 edition:

> "This is neither the first nor the last novel by Jules Verne that the Hungarian reader receives from my hands. The novels of this author—who suddenly became world-famous through his astonishing and at the same time richly instructive stories—I have presented one after another, albeit in abridged form, yet with the necessary details to the fullest possible extent and with a complete picture of the work in question. Such were *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and *The Floating Island*, first published in the journal *Vasárnapi Újság*, and later in book form—except for the last two—expanded here and there, though still shorter than the original text.
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> I have observed that our readers preferred these adaptations, whose content remained intact, to the literal translations of other Jules Verne novels published in Hungarian. The novel *The Mysterious Island* consists of three volumes; each is roughly the same length as our entire abridged version. Consequently, the present abridgment amounts to one third of the original. That addresses the question of length. The first part, published in the last four issues of *Vasárnapi Újság* in 1874, was such a restricted abridgment that it stood in contrast to the following two parts. Therefore, in the present edition, I have considerably expanded it and brought it into balance with the other two sections. Now, having assumed responsibility for these adaptations of Verne's novels, I present this work to the reader who has kindly received the

previous ones, hoping that this novel too will not be rejected, and that my most recent abridgment—namely *Michael Strogoff*—will likewise be welcomed with pleasure.
Budapest, 1 December 1876."

The novel *Michael Strogoff* was published in the columns of *Vasárnapi Újság* in 1876, beginning with issue no. 4 and continuing until the end of the year, up to issue no. 55. Within a few decades, reading practices in Hungary would change rapidly, thanks to the increasing circulation of books written in Hungarian and, above all, to the growing number of translations of foreign literature.

A French version of the article was published as: "Jules Verne à travers la presse hongroise entre 1865–1877," in Ileana Neli Eiben and Andreea Gheorghiu (eds.), *Une Roumaine au pays de la Francophonie: Mélanges en l'honneur de la Professeure Margareta Gyurcsik*. Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2022, pp. 35–46. Publication date: 5 April 2023. EAN: 9789731259512.